

Narrative: the under-rated skill

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'Mere narrative', 'lapses into narrative', 'a narrative answer that fails to answer the question set'. These phrases flow in the blood of history teachers, from public examination criteria to regular classroom discourse. Whilst most of us use narrative in our teaching methods, we have demonised narrative in pupils' written answers. Sean Lang persuades us to rethink our demonology. He suggests that it is not really narrative that we are objecting to – it is unthinking regurgitation, mere reproduction of content, uncritical story-telling, rambled 'pourings out' in the same discourse form that pupil received it from teacher or text. In other words, it is actually 'knowledge-telling' that we are rightly objecting to, not narrative itself. Our assumption tends to be that in order to carry out the opposite of 'knowledge-telling' – the difficult 'knowledge-transforming' – pupils must break out of narrative, break out of chronology and switch to thematic analysis. That thematic analysis remains demanding to do and essential to teach is not questioned. But is it not also possible to 'transform knowledge' by writing a narrative? A narrative is not a given. It is a construct. A good one is incredibly difficult to write. It can be written in multiple ways for multiple purposes and audiences. It is also remarkably versatile as a tool for communicating an historical point. Narrative can be used to carry out some historical practices that we too easily assume can only be done by a non-chronological arrangement. Narrative can explain, narrative can argue, narrative can reveal tight relationship with sources of evidence. Sean makes the case for teaching all pupils the difficult of art of narrative. He suggests that we should elevate it into a goal for serious study and that we should reward expert practice in narrative in our schema for progression and our criteria for assessment.

It is difficult to think of any subject which so consistently and illogically denigrates its own central activity in the way that school history disregards and even penalises the writing of narrative. Do musicians ban their students from writing tunes? Do mathematicians mark their students down if they solve a problem or prove a theorem? Yet in history examinations even a brief passage which tells the reader what happened is rewarded with a large N (for narrative) in the margin and a low mark. Narrative features consistently at the bottom end of mark schemes or grade descriptions. To get a Grade E at A level from Edexcel students must:

*recall and select relevant information from the themes, topics and periods studied to provide a largely relevant but unfocused response to the main issues, which may be in narrative or discursive form.*¹

The descriptor for Grade A does not even mention narrative:

*Students recall, select and deploy relevant, detailed and comprehensive knowledge drawn from the study of the specification content. . . . Students extract, evaluate and synthesise information, ideas and attitudes from a range of source material, placing them in context and integrating them effectively into coherent arguments and explanations.*²

At AQA a Level 1 response 'will be predominantly, or wholly, narrative,' but at Level 4 it demonstrates

'explicit understanding of the demands of the question and provides a consistently analytical response to it.'³

Similar prohibitions apply to Individual Studies, where, one might have thought, students who have gone to the trouble of researching their own stories might be allowed the chance to tell them. AQA, for example, specifically warns:

*'What' and 'how' questions should be avoided because they foster a descriptive or narrative approach.*⁴

Yet 'what' and 'how' questions are exactly what historians do set themselves. Edward Gibbon described how:

*It was at Rome, on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefoot friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.*⁵

No 'To What Extent...?' or 'How Far...?' here: merely 'What happened, and why?' What makes the situation all the more bizarre is that, from the primary years onwards we continually tell children that we are helping them to emulate 'what historians do'. Well, historians 'do' many things, and the most frequent is the steady, sometimes lucrative, production of narrative.



Simple narrative?

Examiners often speak of ‘simple’ or ‘pure’ narrative. However, like Lady Bracknell’s truth, narrative is rarely pure and never simple. Let us take this apparently straightforward narrative passage from Martin Gilbert’s study of the Second World War:

On February 1, in Burma, the Japanese successfully repulsed an attack by Indian troops on the garrison at Donbaik. Unknown to the Japanese, February 1 was also the day on which, at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, ground was broken for the first ever manufacturing plant for the uranium-235 needed to build an atomic bomb. To ensure secrecy and seclusion for the ninety-two acre site, a thousand local families were forced to move away. In their place came engineers and scientists whose number was in due course to reach 82,000, as their deadly work drew closer and closer to completion.⁶

Gilbert’s distinctive approach is to amass a large amount of detail, often quite obscure, apparently letting the facts – for want of a better word – tell their own story. In reality, it is all very carefully crafted. We start with a battle of which few of his readers are likely to have heard, between Japanese and Indian troops in a war of which we still largely know scandalously little. He then switches to an apparently unrelated scene, Oak Ridge, Tennessee – another unfamiliar name to most of his readers – and, as it were, drops his bomb. We do know the significance of the uranium and of the atomic bomb, and it only requires a moment to see the relevance of this information to what we have just learned about what happened at Donbaik. The Japanese may think they are winning, but we, knowing what we do (but ‘Unknown to the Japanese’), realise that their apparent victory will prove futile in the face of the terrible end which is not only in

The atomic bomb. But how does the writer cope with the possibility of a young reader who has never heard of it?
National Archives and Records Administration

store, but is actually in the process of being prepared for them. He could have left things there; instead, since he knows a little about what went on at Oak Ridge, he lets into the secret. Do we need to know that the site was 92 acres? Personally I can never picture measurements of land with any accuracy, so maybe this detail is lost on me, but the image of thousands of families being forced to move away works very effectively to convey the scale of the project, its importance and its secrecy. Similarly, the 82,000 figure for the engineers and scientists might have worked well enough on its own, but it works even better as a figure which they were to reach in due course, since in that way it indicates not just the scale of the project, but the way it grew. Perhaps the only superfluous word in the passage is ‘deadly’ – because Gilbert knows quite well that we know it already.

This passage of apparently ‘simple’ narrative is therefore much more complex than it at first appears. It certainly gives us ‘facts’, but Gilbert has selected them for a reason, juxtaposed them for a reason, and chosen the words with which to describe them (the work at Oak Ridge, for example, does not ‘advance’; it draws ‘closer and closer to completion’) all for a reason. Moreover, the connection between these two sets of events is not made explicitly in the text, but implicitly, via the reader’s internal processes, especially those of prior knowledge and hindsight. The idea of ‘simple’ narrative disappears.

What is Narrative?

The American theorist Hayden White has characterised four different approaches to historical narrative:

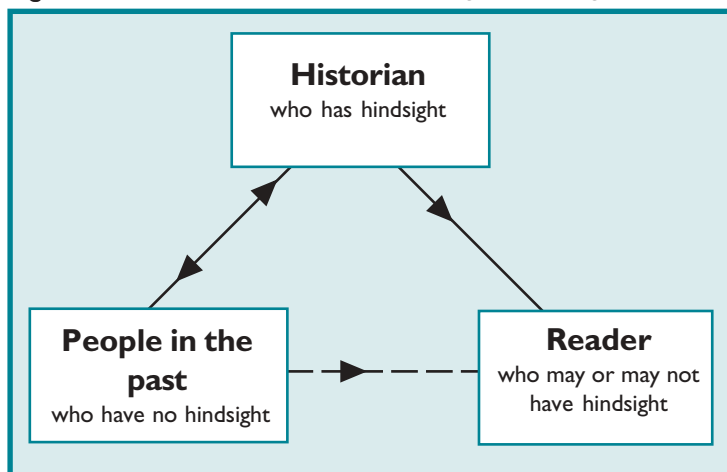
- *formist*, an approach which treats events as essentially self-contained
- *organicist*, which places historical events or features in a much larger picture or longer continuum
- *mechanistic*, which presents events in order to seek for reasons, causes and effects, both of themselves and, more widely, about life in general – the ‘lessons of history’ idea
- *contextualist*, which sets historical events against some form of common framework – ideological or local or whatever.

All history, White argues, is essentially a construct, a *metahistory*, which reflects the historian’s personal outlook and philosophy, whether or not the historian is aware of it. This does not give the historian *carte blanche* to follow his fancies or prejudices into pure invention:

Because history, unlike fiction, is supposed to represent real events and therefore contribute to knowledge in the real world, imagination (or ‘fancy’) is a faculty particularly in need of disciplinization (sic) in historical studies.⁷

This passage of apparently ‘simple’ narrative is much more complex than it at first appears.

Figure 1: Who knows what in the reading and writing of narrative.



White goes on to argue that our conception of ‘real events’ is itself highly subjective, not least because our language is laden with our own meanings, values and assumptions. White’s critics have suggested that he places so much stress on the literary nature of narrative that he underestimates the importance of the research and the weighing of evidence that goes into creating it,⁸ but White’s central point, that historical narrative is a literary construct, remains.

Remembering the reader

Where the writing of history differs most sharply from the writing of fiction, however, is not in the discipline of evidence but rather in the relationship between historian-as-author and the reader. With fiction, the writer tells a story to the reader; the story may play upon the reader’s expectations, assumptions, prejudices or anything else the author may choose, but essentially the author knows a story which the reader does not, and tells it. Historical narrative, by contrast, is a three-way dialogue, between the historian and the past, between

the historian and the reader, and ultimately between the reader and the past. Moreover, unlike the relationship of novelist and reader, the nature of these relationships is not a constant one of storyteller (who knows the story) and listener (who does not). The historian brings hindsight to the study of the past: in many important ways he or she knows more about what was going on than any of the people living at the time, not least, of course, what happened next. The reader, on the other hand, is much harder to pin down. One reader may know a lot about the period, another may know something, and another nothing. The historian has hindsight, and may assume hindsight on the part of the reader, but that assumption may be misplaced. The relationship, therefore, is that shown in Figure 1.

Thus Gilbert plays upon both our ignorance – he can safely assume that we have not heard of the Battle of Donbaik – and our prior knowledge, in this case of the Atom Bomb. What he has not anticipated, however, is the possibility of a young reader who has never heard of the atom bomb and who therefore would not see the significance of the goings-on at Oak Ridge.

Gilbert creates his narrative by careful juxtapositioning of ‘facts’, but what about historians who adopt a more obviously literary voice in their narrative? George Dangerfield’s account of *The Strange Death of Liberal England* has often been cited as an example of vivid narrative. Here he is on the Suffragettes in prison:

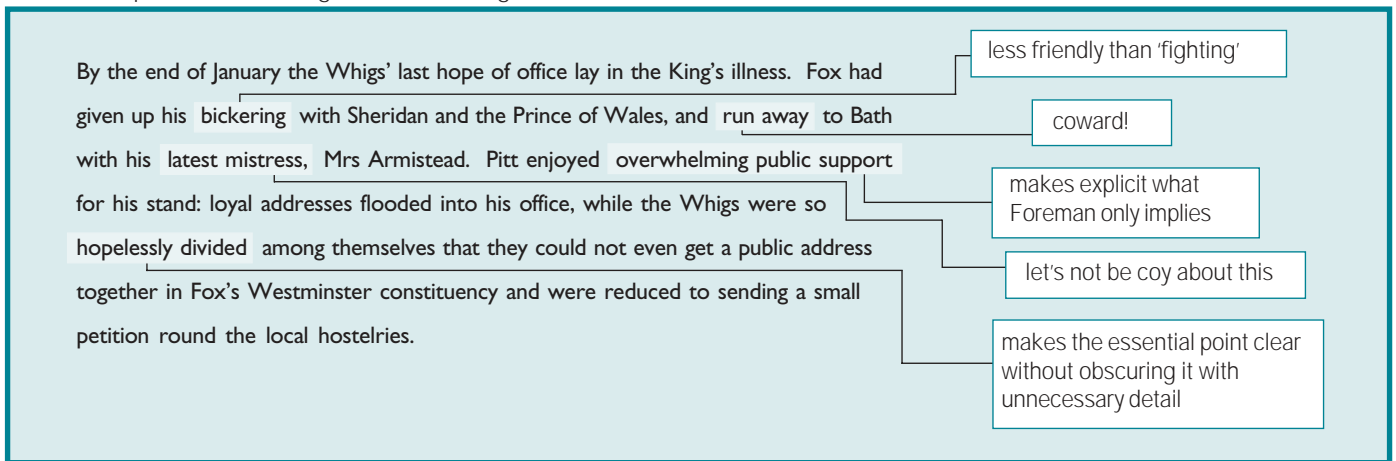
In Pentonville, Mr Pethick Lawrence was forcibly fed for five days. In Holloway, the rank and file still waited, with mounting horror, for the time when the door would open and the feeding tube would be brought in. And they still refused to eat. There was one doctor in Holloway so brutal in his methods that his very appearance called forth shrieks of anguish; and Emily Wilding Davison, utterly wrecked by her ordeal, flung herself from the gallery on which her cell opened, in the hope of killing herself on the floor below. But death, as usual, avoided the advances of Miss Davison. A wire screen broke her fall, and she was merely badly hurt.⁹

What strikes most obviously here is the tone: Dangerfield clearly sympathises with the Suffragettes’ plight but he equally clearly does not like Emily Wilding Davison. Dangerfield is in effect redressing the feminist historical balance: he includes the force-feeding of Mr Pethick Lawrence as if to say ‘Ha! I bet you didn’t realise they did it to men too!’. However, his treatment of Miss Davison’s suicide attempt is patronising: ‘death, as usual, avoided the advances of Miss Davison’, where both the ‘as usual’ (one imagines a sigh of tested patience) and the formal use of ‘Miss’ serve to render a serious event somehow ridiculous. Here too, of course, Dangerfield is playing on his readers’ prior knowledge: we know not only that Miss Davison will kill herself, but how. How much do we lose if we convey the



Emily Wilding Davison (fourth right) at a Suffragette march in Hyde park. A victim of patronising narrative?
By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Figure 2: Altering Foreman's text, not only to show different sympathies, but to take account of a readership with less background knowledge.



same information, with the same intention, but in a less patronising tone?:

Force-feeding was not confined to women. In Pentonville, Mr Pethick Lawrence was force-fed for five days. In Holloway, the women lived in terror of force-feeding – one doctor in particular was notorious for his cruelty – yet they still maintained the hunger-strike. Emily Wilding Davison was driven by despair to throw herself off an upper gallery, and was only saved by the safety netting.

This still suggests sympathy for the Suffragettes (they 'lived in terror of force-feeding') and admiration for their courage ('yet they still maintained the hunger-strike') in contrast with the ambiguity of Dangerfield's 'And still they refused to eat' (which could be read to mean the women were just being obstinate). It is not that one version is any sense 'better' than the other, but rather that narrative is much more malleable and open to different approaches than has commonly been assumed.

The next extract comes from Amanda Foreman's best-selling biography of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*. It offers a vivid picture of the plight of the Whigs as their hopes of power in the Regency Crisis were fading in early 1789:

By the end of January the only barrier between the Whigs and ignominy was the King's illness. Fox had given up fighting with Sheridan and the Prince of Wales, and retired to Bath with Mrs Armistead. In a feeble response to the loyal addresses piling up on Pitt's desk, the Whigs attempted to organize a public address from the borough of Westminster, but with Portland refusing to talk to Sheridan, and Sheridan ignoring Grey, and Grey still furious with the Prince of Wales, and Fitzpatrick, Loughborough, Crauford and Burke nursing their own grievances, the best the party could manage was to send a petition round various public houses.¹⁰

Foreman is sympathetic to the Whigs – the book is a biography of a Whig lady, after all – and there is none of Dangerfield's patronising tone. Instead, we have here a vivid, almost comic image of a party in the doldrums, reduced to sending a petition round the pubs. The

petitions on Pitt's desk – whether literally true or figurative – and the list of sulking Whigs give substance to Foreman's sharply-drawn image of inertia. The problem for a student readership is that superfluous information can be off-putting: the Whig names add to the picture, but are not entirely necessary to make the point. How might the passage look if we replace Foreman's whig sympathies with tory ones, and apply a more student-friendly economy of approach to non-essential information? Figure 2 shows what this might look like.

What we see in Figure 2 is not just a change of political sympathies: it is a different type of narrative. Foreman is presenting a background to her story of *Georgiana*; the second version is a narrative with a political purpose. Already potential work exercises for students suggest themselves: either to carry out the rewrite, as I have done here, or to take two different narratives of the same events and look for the differences in tone and language as a way of detecting the different standpoints of their authors.

Foreman gives us a colourful picture of inactivity, but in this third passage, Simon Schama gives an almost filmic presentation of motion, as he invites us to follow Charlotte Corday on her way to call on Jean-Paul Marat:

At eight o'clock on the morning of July 13, Charlotte Corday walked from her lodgings near the rue des Victoires to the Palais-Royal. It was Saturday and the gardens and galleries were more crowded than usual with people from outlying villages who had come to join the celebrations for Paris's adhesion to the new constitution: a ceremony deliberately planned for July 14. Charlotte moved between columns decorated with tricolor ribbons and emblems of the new republic: the carpenter's level signifying equality; the ubiquitous liberty bonnet. Under a brilliant sky, men and women were sipping lemonade to fortify themselves against the stifling heat that seemed to have stalled itself over the city. From a vendor she bought a newspaper that reported Léonard Bourdon's demand in the Convention for the death sentence against the Girondins. At a shop in one of the arcades she stopped to replace her white Caennaise bonnet with a more sporty black hat decorated with green ribbons. After the deed, all the

Dangerfield includes the force-feeding of Mr Pethick Lawrence as if to say 'Ha! I bet you didn't realise they did it to men too!'

Figure 3: Highly detailed narrative can be faithful to the sources. Close reading and a sharp eye for detail could provide the kind of detail that Schama includes.

Detail in Schama's account	Possible evidential support
eight o'clock on the morning of July 13	The date and time of a murder of this significance would not be difficult to ascertain.
her lodgings near the rue des Victoires	Again, relatively easy to ascertain from depositions made at the trial
to the Palais-Royal	Her movements were investigated as part of the inquiry into the murder. Likely routes can be traced from maps and from site visits.
It was Saturday	Easy to check.
more crowded than usual	Might or might not be mentioned in trial documents, but the sort of thing that would be mentioned in other sources, such as newspapers.
celebrations for Paris's adhesion to the new constitution	Easy to confirm from a variety of sources, including newspapers and engravings of the event.
Charlotte moved between columns	Probably not capable of proof, but a reasonable enough supposition, especially if her route has been traced accurately, and we know what the buildings looked like.
tricolor ribbons and emblems of the new republic: the carpenter's level, the ubiquitous liberty bonnet	Unless someone actually took an inventory of the decorations, this may well be acceptable imagination, but pictures of the celebrations would give a good idea of the decorations which were put up and which it is reasonable to suppose she would have seen.
brilliant sky	Harder to say, though it might be inferred from what we know about the heat
men and women sipping lemonade	Again, we cannot (presumably) be certain, but if we know that lemonade was on sale – and that sort of thing is not too difficult to check – then it is reasonable to assume that some of the crowds would be sipping it on a hot day.
she bought a newspaper	This would come from the trial reports. The contents of the newspaper might not have come out at the trial, but would be easy to know by looking out a newspaper of the right date.
a more sporty black hat decorated with green ribbons	The 'more sporty' is Schama's view, though the pictures from the time would seem to justify it. This might seem an example of Schama's fancy, but he stresses that there is ample evidence that she did indeed wear the hat – 'all the witnesses would remember that green headgear'.
Had she chosen it as the color of 1789...?	This is speculation – we cannot know. However, the idea is not implausible, given the penchant of the time for significant feathers and cockades in hats. In any case, Schama does not overstress the point. He does bring out the undoubted consequences – again, relatively easy to confirm – of her choice of colour.
At a cutler's shop near the Café Février...	This, and the details of the dimensions of the knife, would be easily obtainable from the trial documents.

Figure 4: The end of two contrasting treatments of Germany in 1945

Hitler recognized this relationship with Europe perfectly clearly. He was in revolt against 'the System' not just in Germany but in Europe, against the liberal bourgeois order, symbolized for him in the Vienna which had once rejected him. To destroy this was his mission, the mission in which he never ceased to believe; and in this, the most deeply felt of his purposes, he did not fail. Europe may rise again, but the old Europe of the years between 1789, the year of the French Revolution, and 1939, the year of Hitler's War, has gone for ever – and the last figure in its history is that of Adolf Hitler, the architect of its ruin. *'Si monumentum requires, circumspice'* – 'If you seek his monument, look around'.

Alan Bullock *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (Penguin, 1962) p.806

Hitler had designated Grand Admiral Doenitz his successor. On 1 May Doenitz informed the German people that Hitler had died like a hero at the head of his soldiers and appealed for a continuation of the war, vainly hoping to divide the allies. There was no escape for Germany. On 2 May Berlin capitulated. On 7 May Admiral von Friedeburg and General Jodl signed an instrument of unconditional surrender of all German forces on Luneburg heath. A few days later Doenitz was taken into custody by the allies to await trial as a war-criminal. On 23 May the provisional government set up at Flensburg by Schwerin-Krosigk, on orders from Doenitz, was dissolved. The four powers assumed supreme power in Germany and the Third Reich passed into history.

William Carr *A History of Germany, 1815-1945* (Edward Arnold, 1974) p.422.

witnesses would remember that green headgear. Had she chosen it as the color of 1789, Camille Desmoulins' token of freedom? Charlotte Corday would make it the color of counter-revolution, prohibited, to the ruin of drapers and haberdashers, from any public dress. At a cutler's shop near the Café Février, she bought a wooden-handled kitchen knife with a five-inch blade, which she slipped beneath her dress.¹¹

The effect is like a tracking shot, and the sense of drama is heightened because we know where Charlotte (note Schama's use of her first name) is going and what she intends to do. Highly detailed narrative like this is sometimes criticised for going too far from the sources (how does Schama know the sky was brilliant?) yet in fact, close reading and a sharp eye for detail can provide this sort of detail from the sources, as shown in Figure 3. What might at first seem like the historian's vivid but unsupported imagination at work can have a surer basis in evidence than one might think.

How stories end

Nothing becomes a novel quite like its ending, so let us look at how some history books end. Figure 4 shows the ends of two contrasting treatments of

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Germany in 1945. Bullock tries to tie the ends together in a summary which not only takes us back satisfyingly to Hitler's youth ('the Vienna which had once rejected him') but places him at the end of a metanarrative going back to the French Revolution. His pleasing closing image not only contrasts Wren's breathtaking creation with the destruction and desolation which is Hitler's 'monument', but it would also remind Bullock's original readers of the symbolism of St Paul's, rising defiantly above Hitler's Blitz.

Carr, on the other hand, keeps the narrative going to the end, even to the point of including less familiar details in his final paragraph – how many of us could have identified Admiral von Friedeburg or the provisional government set up by Schwerin-Krosigk? Carr's narrative tells not of Hitler but of Germany itself, and it has now reached its end, with Germany occupied and divided up, the last word given not to the future but to the 'history' that awaits us all.

Appropriately enough, it was a novelist who pointed out the false nature of such 'neat' endings:

PHILIP: I mean, mentally, you brace yourself for the ending of a novel. As you're reading, you're aware of the fact that there's only a page or two left in the book, and you get ready to close it. But with a film there's no way of telling, especially nowadays, when films are much more loosely structured, much more ambivalent, than they used to be. There's no way of telling which frame is going to be the last. The film is going along, just as life goes along, people are behaving, doing things, drinking, talking, and we're watching them, and at any point the director chooses, without warning, without anything being resolved, or explained, or wound up, it can just ... end.

PHILIP shrugs. The camera stops, freezing him in mid-gesture.¹²

If this true of fiction, it should be even more so of history. Yet we still like our neat endings, not because history necessarily follows that pattern, but because the literary convention within which both the historian and the reader feel comfortable dictates it. Francis Fukuyama's idea of the 'End of History' was essentially a political wish conceived within a standard literary format – history is a story; the Cold War is a story; stories have ends; this story has an end; history has an end.¹³ Fukuyama was only unusual in placing the emphasis on the End of the story; more usually historians seek the Beginning, in what Marc Bloch called 'this idol of the historian tribe ... the obsession with origins'.¹⁴ The hunt for origins is essentially a search, via hindsight, for the starting point of a later story – who at the time can ever have been aware that they were living through the 'Origins' of anything? But narrative dictates a structure, with a beginning somewhere (though

exactly where is open to much debate), a middle and an end (which might also be debatable). In other words, constructing narrative offers immense scope for developing our students both as historians and as writers. Why, then, do we eschew it so consistently?

Hostility to narrative

Hostility to narrative among academic historians has a long pedigree. Roland Barthes claimed that the narrative form reduces history to myth,¹⁵ while Fernand Braudel and the French *Annales* school rejected the adrenalin rush of narrative in favour of a more comprehensive analysis of a period:

*Traditional history, with its concern for the short time span, for the individual and the event, has long accustomed us to the headlong, dramatic, breathless rush of its narrative.*¹⁶

Against this drama of narrative the *Annales* school offered the quieter, though sometimes equally dramatic, forensic analysis of a moment, like Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie's famous investigation of Montailou, a single village caught, as it were in a freeze frame.¹⁷ Braudel even went as far as to claim that where there was narrative, there could be no history, properly construed.¹⁸

The rejection of narrative in educational circles is rather different. It is based largely on an unfounded assumption that narrative is a low-order skill, of little or no historical or educational value. This in turn suggests that narrative can be picked up in some definitive form and learnt, as an actor learns the script of a play. But there is no 'script' in history; narrative is a construct, not a given, which will vary at different times, in different contexts, and in different hands. Examiners who look down on narrative because they think it too easy have simply not understood what it is. In fact, what is objected to is not narrative at all, but the *reproduction* and *repetition* of narrative – narrative given originally by the teacher, which is a very different thing.

Educational resistance to narrative has its intellectual roots in an over-emphasis on a presumed dichotomy between the *process* of historical inquiry and the 'product' – the final narrative. Under the former Syllabus E from Edexcel, candidates were required to supplement their Individual Study with a research log weighted equally with the 'product' – i.e. the study itself. The old Wessex Modular A level scheme gave even heavier weighting to the 'process' element. It does not take much thinking to see that all this is, at best, very odd. It is conceivable that a student might perform well on the 'process' of historical inquiry but produce a very poor 'product' – conceivable but not very likely. It is even less likely, indeed hardly conceivable at all, that a student might go through a poor 'process' and yet produce a

strong 'product'. Where is the good work of history to come from, if the work which went into it was poor? Our insistence on isolating narrative from the research which it embodies has led us into some highly questionable assessment practices.

How can narrative be assessed?

As part of my doctoral research, I have been looking at records relating to the Government Maternity Hospital which was set up in Madras in 1844 about which at the outset I knew nothing. I began with a report on the hospital in the 1860s and then started trawling through government records year by year. Sometimes there would be a flurry of documentation, especially if there were a special report on some aspect of the hospital's work; mostly, however, it was a fairly dry diet of catalogues of invoices for equipment or detailed annual reports on the hospital's medical work. Very quickly I was faced with a problem. I could not simply write down *everything*, so on what should I take notes? At first I played safe and noted down as close to everything as possible. But gradually, patterns and links began to emerge, and I began to develop themes in my note-taking accordingly. All those inventories give an idea of what equipment was in use, and therefore what sort of care was on offer; the medical case notes allow us to trace the patterns of particular types of operation, or to work out the average age of the women who were admitted. As the story – the narrative – took shape, so I began to take full notes on what I now perceived as relevant and useful, and skipped the things which I would not need. There is, in other words, a close and intrinsic link between historical research and the construction of narrative, and it is quite wrong to think of them, and assess them, as separate entities.

Yet this is what has happened. The process has been abetted by our heavy over-emphasis on the detailed, almost agonising, evaluation of sources at the expense not just of narrative but sometimes of the whole flow of historical writing. In its instructions for the Individual Study, for example, OCR lays down:

*Source material (primary and/or secondary) must be used, interpreted and evaluated within the essay.*¹⁹

Students who produced something rather closer to what historians actually write were heavily penalised. Now, given that analytical questions do demand analytical answers, one cannot quarrel with the criticism of narrative in conventional examinations, but there is no reason why the construction of narrative should not be a major assessment objective within coursework or Individual Studies. The trick is not to require the repetition of a narrative, but its construction. We have something to learn here from the French baccalauréat, where the tradition is not to set precise questions, as in A level papers, but to

set a theme, with a certain amount of stimulus material, and to require students to construct a composition. For example, in 2002 one of the themes was *Relations between the USA and the USSR 1945-1991*. Students were provided with a short timechart of key dates, none of them very obscure – Yalta, Berlin blockade, Sputnik, Helsinki and so on – and teachers were provided with an outline of the major points and angles to cover in preparing the pupils for the exam. In the exam, however, there is no question as such; students are required to compose on the given theme. Thus, within the context of an examination, they are, in effect, required to construct their own narrative.

It is not easy simply to import forms of assessment from one tradition into another, but the French example does help us to see that there is more than one way of assessing command of a historical period, and that narrative can be a very high-order skill. Let us consider some of the ways in which narrative might be brought in from the cold:

a) How..? Why..? Narrative

This is the most straightforward type of narrative, the sort which arises from the historian's initial curiosity, whether it be Gibbon in the Forum or a student starting to research an Individual Study. An appropriate instruction might read:

- Using the materials you have been given, construct a narrative to show why revolution broke out in France in 1789.
- From your research, construct a narrative to explain how the Spanish were able to conquer the Aztec and Inca Empires in the sixteenth century.

b) Narrative for a specific purpose

Historians, like other writers, are often called upon to write for a specific purpose or occasion. Anniversaries have come to play an important part in the life of anyone involved with history, but individuals, companies, or institutions – including schools – all sometimes commission their own history. The historian here must achieve a balance between the wishes of the clients, who may well be expecting a fairly cosy type of narrative, and what the archives might throw up; there is also the question of where to start the story, how to trace it, and above all how to relate it to the present and beyond. A suitable task, in which the student would already have looked at the archive material, might set a scenario like this:

You have been commissioned to write a history of Bentley's Ltd., a successful local firm of chemists. From the materials you have looked at, construct a narrative to explain why the firm was founded, how it has developed over the past hundred years, and how its past is helping to shape its future. In a separate section, write a commentary for other historians to explain your selection of the material, and the interpretation of the firm you are putting forward.

There is a close and intrinsic link between historical research and the construction of narrative.

Figure 5: Some Ideas for enquiries culminating in narrative activities at Key Stage 3

Enquiry question (to govern a short sequence of lessons)	Substantial, concluding activity towards which pupils work across the lesson sequence. Each activity involves writing a narrative and reflecting upon the process and product afterwards.	How narrative might be integrated with existing aspects of historical learning required by the Key Elements of the National Curriculum for history at Key Stage 3 ²¹
What kinds of Becket stories created the Becket legend?	You are a Dean of Canterbury Cathedral in the 13 th century. Tell the story of Becket in such a way as to encourage pilgrims to come and visit his shrine. Later, King Henry VIII came to hate the story of Thomas à Becket and had the shrine closed down. Write the story of Becket and the King so as to make Becket look like the villain of the story. <i>Pupils then examine each others' narratives, identifying and comparing choice of content, structural decisions and stylistic devices used to establish consistent viewpoint in each narrative.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change and diversity in points of view • How viewpoints affect narrative • Narrative in interpretations
What kind of story can we make out of the children's crusade?	Tell the story of the children's crusade to an audience knowing nothing about it, and very little about the Middle Ages. Think carefully about how you will distinguish certainty from uncertainty to your reader. Use the phrase bank that we built up – 'We cannot be certain how far the children got but...' 'One thing the sources seem to agree about here is...' Think about how and where you will integrate background information about medieval life into your story, without interrupting the story's flow. <i>Afterwards, teacher leads discussion on (i) how the story was integrated with background information for the reader; (ii) how pupils managed certainty and uncertainty into their writing.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating problematic sources into a narrative. • Revealing characteristic features of a period through narrative.
How could people view Cromwell so differently?	It is 1659. You want to influence discussions about the future government of England. Write the story of Oliver Cromwell EITHER from a republican point of view called 'Our Chief of Men' OR from a royalist point of view called 'Regicide and Traitor'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using narrative to show strong viewpoints held in the past.
Stalingrad: when did disaster for the Germans become inevitable?	Well, you have escaped from Stalingrad, but the Fuhrer is furious. You need to write a report for him explaining what went wrong. Just be careful: don't forget who is going to read it! OR Write an account of the battle of Stalingrad, showing clearly when you think the turning point was making German retreat inevitable. <i>Pupils compare their accounts, especially the judgements that they made about critical moments and turning points. They reflect on how they showed these in their writing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change, cause and the idea of inevitability explored through narrative
How do you persuade the modern public of an historical figure's significance?	The BBC is running 'Great Britons of the Modern Age'. Write the life story of your chosen Greatest Briton in such a way that the public will vote for him or her. <i>Building upon cross-curricular literacy work and work in English at Key Stages 2 and 3. Pupils might be encouraged to reflect on how narrative can be a form of 'persuasive writing' – one of the text types to which pupils are introduced in primary school.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using a narrative to argue for historical significance.
Why did Sarajevo lead to war?	Write a short chapter for a modern history textbook telling the final stage in the story of the road to World War I. Begin with the assassination and move to the outbreak of hostilities. You must write a gripping narrative, but you must use your narrative to explain clearly <u>how</u> and <u>why</u> the assassination triggered the final events to war. You will need to build into your story some reference to the longer-term causes, enough to show the connections, but without getting sidetracked! <i>Here pupils have to tell what might seem a straightforward story (but isn't) across a short time span. In order to secure its explanatory force, they will need to locate that short story in a bigger narrative.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Causal explanation through narrative – the explanatory narrative
How did Britain become an industrialised country?	Using the following sources, write a narrative of how Britain became an industrialised country. You must choose ONE of the following titles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A British triumph • A British tragedy Remember that you must present your account as a readable story, choosing and positioning your facts to fascinate, enthral or disturb the reader with the speed or the significance of each change and development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling 'big stories' of long-term change through narrative. • Selecting from and integrating sources to show the relationship between the narrative and the evidential record.

The trick is not to require the repetition of a narrative, but its construction.

c) Narrative in different voices

Narrative needs a narrator. Usually historians adopt a fairly detached voice, but occasionally some have played about with the normal conventions: Norman Hampson's *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* drops the normal historian-as-narrator approach in favour of a sort of Renaissance dialogue between different 'types' – party member, man from the ministry, and so on.²⁰ Hampson's approach makes for arresting reading, but it is not the only way to show how different viewpoints can lead to different versions of the past. For assessment purposes, tasks might read:

- Construct a narrative from a Marxist perspective to show the growth of bourgeois capitalist government in Britain 1800-1917
- Construct two narratives from contrasting viewpoints of German expansion in the 1930s and Britain and France's policy of appeasement.

d) The 'open' narrative

This follows French practice, and leaves it up to the candidate what sort of narrative to construct. It would be important to provide some sort of common body of stimulus material, as well as a heading. This in turn would mean getting away from our traditional reliance on a specific question in favour either of a genuinely open and 'neutral' heading:

- The Life of the Labouring Poor in Victorian Britain

or of a more provocative title, designed to stimulate discussion:

- The Exploitation of the Labouring Poor in Victorian Britain

Narrative depends heavily on the sources from which it is derived, and any narrative exercise would have to be based on a sufficient archive of material, either an actual archive, or else an archive online, or at the very least a comprehensive 'reader' of materials published to accompany the course, which could serve as the basis for the construction of the narrative.

Conclusions

- The construction of narrative is not an oddity: it is the central activity of historical work, and as such it should be included within any scheme of assessment in history.
- Narrative is a construct, not a given, and its construction may follow many different literary forms and modes.
- Intellectual objections to narrative are essentially different from educational ones, which are not really

to narrative itself, but to the learning and repetition of narrative.

- Models for the assessment of narrative exist in other examining traditions, and might be adapted to fit our own situation.
- Assessment of narrative will depend on the provision of an appropriately broad archive of material on which it can draw, either via the Internet, or through original research, or through material provided directly by the examining body.
- There is a wide variety of possible narrative tasks which might be set.
- Narrative is intrinsically linked to historical research, and the two should therefore not be assessed separately.

It would be very pleasing to bring this particular story to a neat and satisfying close but, as we have seen, life isn't like that.

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